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# **The Iranian Armed Forces: Clerical Control and Military Effectiveness**

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**An Intelligence Assessment**

**Top Secret**

*NESA 84-10261C*

*September 1984*

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# **The Iranian Armed Forces: Clerical Control and Military Effectiveness**

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**An Intelligence Assessment**

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**The Iranian Armed Forces:  
Clerical Control and  
Military Effectiveness**

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**Key Judgments**

*Information available  
as of 15 August 1984  
was used in this report.*

Five years after the Iranian revolution and the continuing purges of the military, Iran's clerical leadership remains suspicious of the loyalty of the country's Army, Navy, and Air Force. To monitor the loyalty and performance of these services, Tehran has created a political control apparatus attached to all regular armed forces units. Independent of the Ministry of Defense, this Organization for Ideology is directed and staffed by clerics loyal to the clerical government and Ayatollah Khomeini:

- The system of informers and political/ideological officers is so extensive that we judge the regular Iranian armed forces cannot pose a serious threat to the clerical regime.

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The clerics also have attempted to counterbalance the regular forces by transforming two irregular organizations—the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij militia—into a major military force that is more loyal to the regime:

- Clashes between the Army and the Guard—perhaps leading to a civil war—are likely if a lengthy succession crisis occurs after Khomeini's death.
- The regular armed forces are weakened, however, by divided loyalties and indecisiveness and probably would have difficulty defeating the 500,000 or more Guard and Basij troops now under arms.

Although the creation of a political/ideological apparatus has increased Tehran's control over the armed services, we believe it also has contributed to Iran's military ineffectiveness against Iraq. Clerical interference and intimidation and the regular military's fear that the Revolutionary Guard will eventually replace it have hindered operations and lowered morale. Lack of cooperation between Army and irregular units has resulted in heavy casualties and missed opportunities throughout the war.

Tehran probably believes that the enhanced security provided by the control apparatus offsets the cost of reduced military effectiveness and that surveillance of the military should be increased. Iranian clerics probably believe that military effectiveness will increase as more personnel are indoctrinated and trained.

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We believe the clerical regime will combine and reorganize the existing armed forces and combat units of the Revolutionary Guard into new military services after the war. The political/ideological apparatus in the new armed forces will help strengthen Iran's ability to defend itself against foreign military threats by instilling loyalty and obedience throughout the services. A sizable Revolutionary Guard organization will continue to exist, however, to maintain internal security, operate abroad, and counterbalance the regular Iranian military.

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## The Iranian Armed Forces: Clerical Control and Military Effectiveness

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Iran's clerical regime has consolidated its control over the country and has resisted the Iraqi invasion, but it continues to doubt the loyalty of the regular Iranian armed forces. To deal with this problem, Tehran has built an extensive organization to monitor the armed forces' loyalty and increase their willingness to fight. The regime has succeeded in controlling the armed forces by establishing a broad network of informants and by using the irregular forces to counterbalance the regular services.

### Controlling the Regular Armed Forces

**Structure.** The Iranian clerical leadership depends primarily on the Organization for Ideology—*Sazman-e Ideolog*—to monitor and promote the loyalty of the regular armed forces. The Sazman has units and personnel assigned to all levels within the Army, Navy, and Air Force,

These political/ideological units are responsible for disseminating propaganda, propagating Islamic tenets, and, most importantly, maintaining "ideological security" and carrying out counterintelligence operations,

Sazman units do not report to the Ministry of Defense, their nominal superior, but go outside military channels directly to a separate Sazman directorate overseeing the armed forces. Mohammad Reyshahri heads the Organization for Ideology. He is also Chief Justice of the Revolutionary Court system and a confidant of Ayatollah Khomeini and probably reports directly to him,

Sazman political/ideological bureaus, units, or officers are attached to all armed forces units down to the platoon or barracks level. Airbases, for example, have a ratio of about 1 political official to 100 Air Force personnel,

A cleric appointed by Tehran usually commands each Sazman office, although trusted military officers sometimes head ideological units.

The political control officials appear to maintain close liaison with Revolutionary Courts and Revolutionary "Komitehs" to increase regime authority over the military. The Revolutionary Courts and military police arrest, prosecute, try, and punish suspects,

The "Komitehs," made up mostly of noncommissioned officers and enlisted men, apparently have ideological and surveillance functions over personnel. The chief of the political/ideological unit sometimes is a member of these other organizations or can direct them to arrest offenders,

**Enforcement.** The Sazman units use an extensive system of informers to provide information on disloyal activity in the military,

Names are then turned over to the military police and Revolutionary Courts for arrest and trial.

political/ideological officials have taken advantage of the traditional animosity between officers, warrant officers, and enlisted men to foment distrust and elicit information on disloyalty. We estimate that the political units have thousands of informers in the Iranian armed forces. In larger Iranian Army units, the political/ideological units command "strike groups" that follow regular units into battle to prevent them from deserting,

the threat of reporting suspect activity to Tehran gives political officials control over the decisions of the regular military unit commander. Political officials can influence an officer's actions by forwarding the findings of the "Komitehs" in each unit that periodically meet to assess and criticize the unit commander's performance.

clerics directing political/ideological units were the real commanders of the bases.

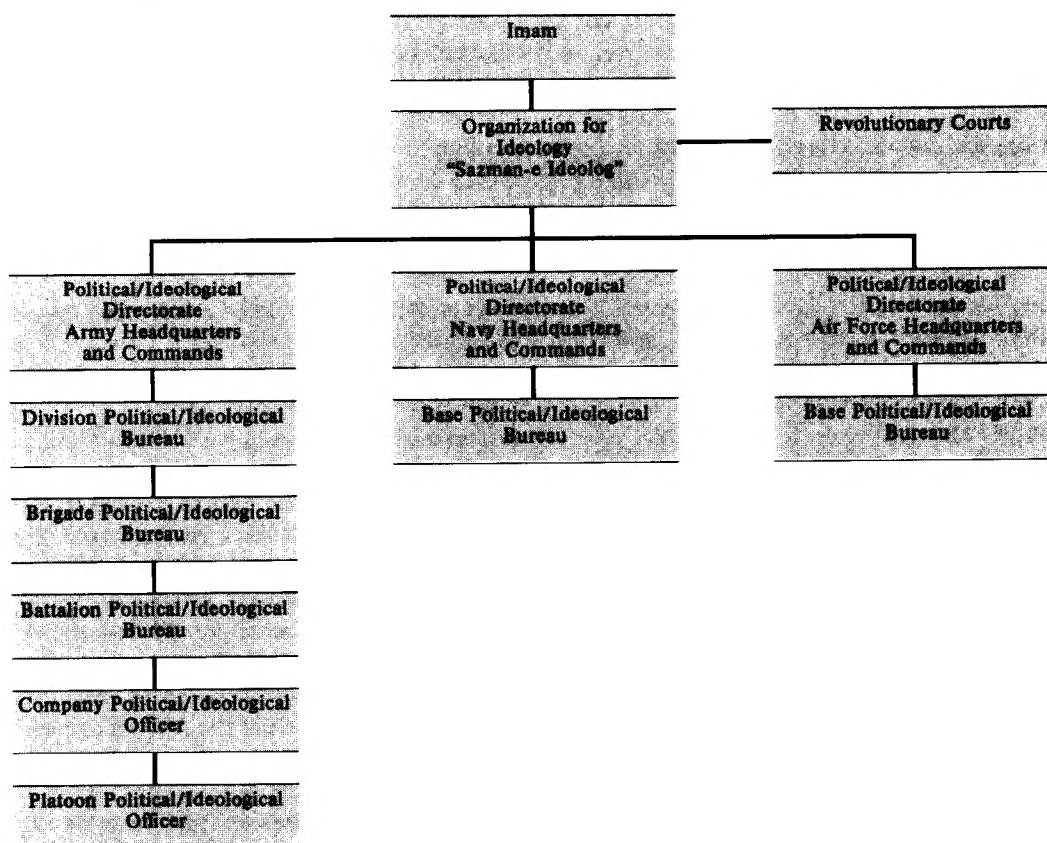
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**Figure 1**  
**Political Control Structure of the Iranian Armed Forces**



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The clerics were preparing to remove about 300 politically suspect officers and enlisted men from combat positions in 1983,

We believe, however, that the number of military personnel arrested or executed annually is under a thousand—less than 1 percent of the 300,000 men in the regular forces.

The number probably has declined in the last year because most officers loyal to the old regime have been purged and replaced by men who are careful to hide their political beliefs or are neutral toward or support the Islamic republic.

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**Molding a Loyal Military Command.** Tehran also has laid the foundation for a more loyal military command by carefully controlling who is chosen for the officer corps and who is promoted. [redacted]

[redacted] a cleric in each unit must approve all officer candidates or applicants for the military academies and vouch for their political reliability. Six months before an officer becomes eligible for promotion, he must attend a three-month series of indoctrination classes taught by clerics that stress sacrifice and martyrdom for the regime, [redacted]

The clerical leadership has been careful to assign loyal or obedient officers to top military commands and probably exploits disagreements between them to increase the regime's security. Gen. Qasim Zahirnejad owes his reinstatement in the postrevolution Army, his promotion to general, and his appointment as Chief of the Joint Armed Forces Staff to his family ties with influential clerics, [redacted]

[redacted] Col. Ali Sayyed Shirazi was appointed commander of the Iranian Ground Forces, [redacted] because of his devotion to Islam and his relationship with Ayatollah Montazeri, Khomeini's heir apparent. [redacted]

[redacted] Zahirnejad and Shirazi often are at odds over the conduct of the war, but the clerical leadership probably believes that disagreements among top officers reduce the chances they will unite in a military coup. [redacted]

The regime also tries to buy the loyalty of some servicemen, especially those in the Air Force with critical skills, [redacted]

Air Force officers have received gifts of land, scarce consumer goods, fuel, and low-cost housing. These privileges often go to people close to the clerics, while others who have served the country well are ignored, [redacted]

### **The Revolutionary Guard and Basij**

The clerical leadership also has formed and maintains the Revolutionary Guard Corps—*Sepah-e Pasdaran*—and the Basij militia at least partly as an alternative or counterbalancing military force to the traditional armed forces. Unlike the Army, Navy, and Air Force, whose loyalty is still largely questionable because of their association with the Shah and Western training, the Guard is manned by personnel

chosen for their loyalty to the new regime. The Iranian leadership views the Revolutionary Guard as an elite force that is the protector of the regime against a military coup, according to press statements [redacted]

**Controlling the Guard.** Tehran has developed an extensive political control structure to oversee the Revolutionary Guard and Basij that is similar to the apparatus attached to the regular services. The Guard is directly subordinate to Ayatollah Khomeini through his personal representative to the Corps, the cleric Fazlollah Mahallati, according to press reports. Mahallati sits on the Supreme Council of the Revolutionary Guard and also heads the Guard's Supreme Directorate of Ideological and Political Affairs, which is responsible for monitoring the political reliability of Guard personnel. [redacted]

The Directorate appears to function in much the same way as Sazman units in the regular armed forces. Directorate officials are attached to all Revolutionary Guard and Basij units to oversee propaganda, select new recruits, and oversee the activities and decisions of unit commanders. In mid-1984 in a press interview, Mahallati stated that there were 250 clergy providing ideological training in the Guard. We estimate that there are thousands of officials and informers responsible for political control in the Guard and Basij. [redacted]

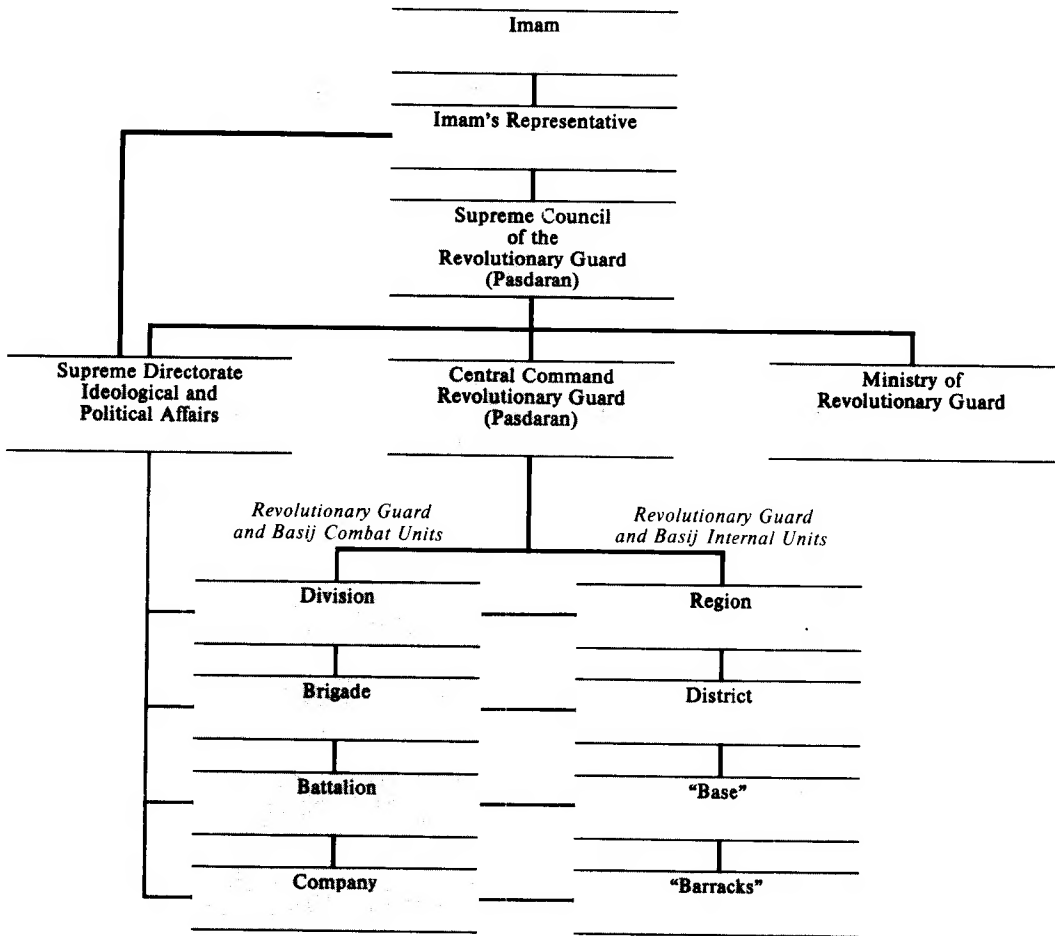
Even more than in the regular services, Tehran has been careful to select men to command the Revolutionary Guard who have proved their loyalty to the revolution and have an interest in the survival of the regime and its leaders. Mohsen Rafiq-Dust owes his appointment as Minister of the Revolutionary Guard to his close relationship with Majlis Speaker Rafsanjani, [redacted]

[redacted] Rafiq-Dust first came to the attention and favor of Ayatollah Khomeini because of his willingness to execute a number of the Shah's senior military and police officials. Mohsen Rezai became commander of the Revolutionary Guard when he was friendly with Rafiq-Dust and because he may be related to President Khamenei, [redacted]

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Figure 2  
Revolutionary Guard and Basij Command Structure



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*A Rival to the Armed Forces.* The major role of the Revolutionary Guard in the war against Iraq has increased its stature and capabilities as a military competitor to the Army. As a consequence, the Guard's abilities to counter the regular Army in an internal struggle have also grown.

Guard troops have often borne

the brunt of the fighting and, because of their aggressiveness, have helped win some major battles.

there are 120,000 armed Revolutionary Guards.

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**Estimated Iranian Military Manpower,  
July 1984**

|                     |                 |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| Army                | 235,000         |
| Air Force           | 50,000          |
| Navy                | 15,000          |
| Revolutionary Guard | 100,000-150,000 |
| Basij               | over 500,000    |

High-ranking Guard officials have claimed that the Guard eventually will replace the traditional services, and it has attempted to assume the functions and capabilities of an army, navy, and air force over the last four years. [redacted] the Guard formed an armored division in late 1981 and established artillery and commando units in mid-1982.

Although the Army provides the Guard with logistic support, [redacted] the Guard set up its own artillery ammunition factory near Tehran in April 1984. [redacted]

[redacted] the Guard has been establishing its own air force and began making proposals for a joint Revolutionary Guard/Air Force command in early 1983. [redacted]

[redacted] Guards were learning to fly jet fighter aircraft in Syria and that the Guard wanted to establish its own flight school. The pilots from this school were to make up the nucleus of the future Revolutionary Guard Air Force. [redacted]

[redacted] 12 Guards were sent to East Germany for training on MIG-19 and MIG-21 fighter aircraft in early July. There is no other evidence that Guards are being trained on fighter aircraft, but Guard pilots already fly some prop and small jet aircraft, [redacted]

[redacted] The Guard has tried to purchase transports and helicopters, [redacted]

Revolutionary Guard naval units have formed joint commands with regular Navy forces for operations in the Persian Gulf. In mid-December 1982, Guard

officials attempted to gain control over the Navy through a request to share naval facilities, [redacted]

[redacted] Guard personnel serve on some regular Navy vessels, and [redacted]

[redacted] Revolutionary Guard naval units assumed responsibility for the defense and patrol of Iran's coasts in February 1983. [redacted]

[redacted] the Guard has received new patrol boats in the last year. [redacted]

[redacted]

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In late 1979 the Iranian regime created the Basij—"Mobilization of the Oppressed"—in response to Ayatollah Khomeini's call for a 20-million-man army to defend against a possible US invasion and later to fight Iraq, [redacted] The Basij is a

lightly armed and poorly trained militia that has provided the Revolutionary Guard with the masses of fanatical but expendable manpower to launch "human wave" attacks. Revolutionary Guard cadres are responsible for training, arming, and commanding Basij units, [redacted]

[redacted] as of mid-1984 there were 700,000 armed Basij troops, although the Iranians generally claim publicly that the organization has 2.5 million members. [redacted]

**Impact on Military Effectiveness**

**Low Morale.** The creation of an extensive political control organization in the armed forces has reduced the threat of a military coup, but it has also hurt military effectiveness and has not stopped an apparent decline in the services' will to fight. [redacted]

[redacted] Army units sent to the frontlines in June 1984 had little desire to wage war and suffered a large number of desertions, [redacted] The Army's reluctance to fight tends to be confirmed by casualty statistics [redacted] that indicate that the Army suffered only 2,000 casualties in combat early this year compared with Revolutionary Guard and Basij losses of over 32,000. [redacted]

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Interference by clerics or political officials in the conduct of military operations appears to be one of the main causes of military ineffectiveness and the decline in officer morale. In mid-February [redacted]

[redacted] there was widespread discontent among middle-level and senior officers about the clerical leadership's interference with planning and combat. [redacted] orders from clerics make little sense and are not enforceable without disrupting operations. The undermining of officers' authority by the clerics also has demoralized middle-level commanders in the Army, Navy, and Air Force. [redacted] The presence of clerical military "advisers" has disrupted the chain of command because, when they have the backing of political officials, junior and noncommissioned officers sometimes refuse to obey orders from more senior officers. [redacted]

**Problems on the Battlefield.** Tehran's attempts to integrate Revolutionary Guard units with the regular services in "joint commands" on the battlefield have fostered only a surface unity and have not improved coordination or military effectiveness. [redacted]

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about the Army's willingness to fight have caused the Basij to refuse orders from the Army and led to almost no communication between the two groups, [redacted]

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**Friction Between Regulars and Irregulars.** The development of the Revolutionary Guard and threats that it will eventually replace the regular services have further undermined Iranian military effectiveness. Press statements by leading Iranian officials—including Khomeini—promising that the regular services will not be dissolved have not calmed fears among officers. [redacted]

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[redacted] officers believe the clerical regime is using the war to weaken the armed forces so they will be easier to disband once the conflict ends. [redacted]

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Animosity between the Revolutionary Guard and the regular services occasionally erupts into clashes. In June 1982, 20 Guards were killed in a shootout between Guard and Army personnel at an Army base near Esfahan, [redacted]

The integration of untrained and uneducated Revolutionary Guard and Basij troops with armed forces units has also helped reduce efficiency in some operations. A lack of training and discipline caused Basij troops to panic and led to the failure of attacks in early 1984, [redacted]

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[redacted] in May 1984 Revolutionary Guards in Shiraz were used to put down a mutiny by an Army unit that refused to leave for the front. [redacted]

[redacted] because Guard pilots lack even a high school education, they are too ignorant to fly and crash many of the helicopters they attempt to pilot. Revolutionary Guards assigned to ships have extremely limited training, [redacted]

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The Revolutionary Guard, in turn, has complained that the Army's lack of support and aggressiveness has undermined joint operations. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

the Army withheld intelligence and artillery support during attacks to cause Guards and Basij to die in futile frontal assaults. Revolutionary Guard and Basij troops also have been unhappy with Army logistic support, [REDACTED]. Guard commanders were complaining about shortages of modern weapons last June. [REDACTED]

#### Prospects

**Regime Security.** In our judgment, the extent of the regime's political control apparatus makes it unlikely that conspirators in the regular services could recruit and organize a sufficient number of units to carry out a successful coup. Moreover, we believe that no coup could succeed without the complicity or acquiescence of both Revolutionary Guard officers at Army commands and large numbers of Revolutionary Guard units. The Guard owes its existence and prosperity to the clerical regime and will not support plots that would replace its benefactors in Tehran with the military. [REDACTED]

If a power struggle develops, the Revolutionary Guard is likely to play a more important role than the armed forces in determining a successor to Khomeini in the short term. The Guard maintains extensive internal security forces inside Iran—particularly in the capital and other major cities—while almost all Army units are at the front. The Guard also can call up Basij militia in any area of the country. A faction controlling Revolutionary Guard units probably would use them to seize key power centers quickly after Khomeini's death to solidify its control. At the same time, political control officials in the services would try to keep regular armed forces units in garrison to prevent a coup during a succession crisis. Moreover, because they fear being charged with disloyalty by political officials, Army commanders probably would be reluctant to favor one contending faction in Tehran over another. [REDACTED]

The regular armed forces probably would be drawn into a conflict—perhaps leading to a civil war—if a power struggle among clerics continued for at least several months. Such a conflict could begin if one clerical faction ordered Revolutionary Guards to neutralize armed forces units and another ordered these units to resist. Because of indecisiveness and divided loyalty, the regular armed forces would have difficulty winning such a conflict. Some ideologically committed Army commanders probably would lead their units to side with the Guard, further reducing the chance that the military would prevail. Although the Guard is inferior in manpower and equipment to the regular services, it probably would remain unified and could mobilize hundreds of thousands of Basij troops to support its cause. [REDACTED]

**Military Effectiveness.** Rivalry and mistrust between the regular armed services and the Revolutionary Guard will continue to limit Iranian military effectiveness against Iraq and other military opponents for the foreseeable future. The regime's political control measures will impose an outward appearance of loyalty or acquiescence in the Army, Navy, and Air Force but will not cause them to fight more effectively or vigorously against Iraq. Because of its fear of a takeover by the Revolutionary Guard and a desire to limit its own losses, the Army will delay attacks, withhold assistance, and attempt to force the Guard to bear the burden of fighting. Revolutionary Guard suspicion of the regular military's loyalty and the Guard's unwillingness to subordinate its troops completely to the regular military command will lead to additional missed opportunities and heavy casualties. [REDACTED]

The Iranian regime, however, appears to believe that the control gained by both the political apparatus in the military and the use of the Revolutionary Guard as a counterbalance to the regulars is worth the present military ineffectiveness. Moreover, Tehran probably believes that overall Iranian military effectiveness will eventually improve. The Revolutionary Guard will gain additional military expertise in combat and will grow stronger as it expands into a force that includes artillery, armor, air, and naval units.

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Through combat attrition, control of promotions and assignments, and officer selection, the regime also will remain the Army, Navy, and Air Force with personnel who will work with the Guards. [REDACTED]

**A New Iranian Armed Force.** In our judgment, after the war Tehran will combine the armed forces and combat units of the Revolutionary Guard and reorganize them into new, more loyal military services. The new military probably will be staffed primarily by personnel from the existing Guard, although some men from the old armed forces who had proved their loyalty would be included. Most of the present regular forces personnel are likely to be retired immediately after the war—those needed in technical positions would be retained only until politically loyal replacements are trained. The clerical leadership understands the need for competent personnel to fight Iraq, however, and does not want to further weaken Iran's war effort by launching a destabilizing reorganization during the conflict. [REDACTED]

In the long term, especially after the postwar reformation of the armed forces, we believe the political/ideological organization in the military will help strengthen Iran's ability to defend itself against foreign military threats. The new unified armed forces will eliminate some coordination problems. Continuing indoctrination will help instill a fanaticism, similar to that seen in Revolutionary Guard and Basij units, among Iranian enlisted men that would stiffen efforts to defend Iran against any attacker. A new, loyal officer corps will slowly emerge from the reorganized Iranian military academies. They will bring greater professionalism to the military and will replace incompetent "political" commanders appointed during the war with Iraq. [REDACTED]

In any event, we believe Tehran will continue to maintain a Revolutionary Guard organization—independent of the Ministry of Defense—as a possible hedge against future disloyalty, even in the new, reformed Iranian armed forces. The Guard will be an elite force primarily responsible for internal security and for covert operations abroad. Moreover, the Guard probably would retain control over a Basij militia organization as a large-scale source of manpower outside the regular services' influence. [REDACTED]

#### Implications for the United States

For the foreseeable future the clerical regime will continue to believe that the United States and other Western countries are attempting to foment sedition within the armed forces. The purging of regular servicemen associated with the West has reduced significantly the number of officers who support a more favorable relationship with the United States. Moreover, we believe the political control organizations probably will be fairly effective in discovering and eliminating efforts by any country to influence Iranian military personnel in Iran or abroad. [REDACTED]

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